

Faith Beyond Oneself: A Pillar of Spiritual Fitness

As mentioned above, *faith* is characterized as recognizing, trusting, believing, or being in a relationship with someone greater than one's self.¹ Faith is indispensable to Marines' overall spiritual fitness, and every effort should be made by the Corps to strengthen the faith of its warfighters. This strengthening can only be achieved when the Corps' leadership affirms that all Marines are not only physical beings, but also spiritual beings – even those who *do not* profess to be religious or practitioners of a specific faith tradition.²

The Corps needs to locate its understanding of faith and religious expression on a continuum. This continuum ranges from complete unbelief to a Marine who is a committed practitioner of a named religion (See Statler Appendix 1).³ Statler writes:

*“If...religion is understood in a limited or ecclesiastical manner, and necessarily involves a particular manifested deity or Higher Power, then religion as such does not exist for the majority of Marines, has no impact on how they think or feel, and is not helpful in their process of becoming spiritually fit.”*⁴

While Western thought has commonly placed faith or religion within the constructs of particular ecclesiastical traditions or doctrines, the pluralistic context of the Marine Corps and the increasingly diverse beliefs of its warfighters necessitates a wider aperture.⁵ Statler posits, “A broad understanding of religion – one that encompasses a faith in something beyond oneself - is the proper context to develop an approach to spiritual fitness in the USMC.”⁶ For the Marine who identifies as a theist, the focal point of their faith might be God or a perceived Higher

¹ Scott, Brent, RDML. *Spiritual Fitness in the Marine Corps*” (2016).

² Statler, Thomas J. “Finding Our Flip Side: Mapping the Development of Spiritual Fitness in the United States Marine Corps.” (2016), 5.

³ Scott, *Spiritual Fitness*.

⁴ Statler, *Finding Our Flip Side*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Power.⁷ However, faith can also be grounded in anything that provides an individual with a source of courage or strength, such as the values, traditions, esprit de corps, and eternal *fidelis* of the historic Marine Corps community, or the meaningful relationships forged in the faithful and fiery trenches of day-to-day Marine Corps life.⁸

Marine Corps life is lived in the trenches, and it is within these trenches that *all* Marines – young or old, junior or senior - encounter existential threats to their being. Some examples of these threats include, but are not limited to guilt or condemnation, emptiness or meaninglessness, or anxieties about their fate or potential death. All of these threats can be born out of situations and circumstances taking place in Marines’ personal and professional lives.⁹ But regardless of *what* is fueling the existential threat, the critical question the Corps needs to ask itself is “*How* can Marines overcome these threats to their being?”¹⁰ The answer – as Wesley accurately asserts - is through a strong and steadfast faith, faith in anything greater than oneself, that gives Marines the courage and clout, the grits and the guts to confidently confront and triumphantly transcend these threats in a way that keeps their honor clean and upholds the sacred values of the Corps both in times of peace, and ultimately in seasons of war! Marine Corps’ leadership in general, and Navy Chaplains in particular, play a vital role in strengthening and fostering this faith, which can result in heightened and healthy levels of spiritual fitness within Marines, and the betterment of history’s preeminent warfighting institution.

Certain conditions must be met in order for the Corps’ leaders and chaplains to strengthen spiritual fitness of Marines and advance the overall development of their full human person.

According to Dr. John Macquarrie, a healthy approach to fostering faith and improving religious

⁷ Wesley, Darrell J. *Always Faithful: Transcendence as Spiritual Formation in the United States Marine Corps.* (2016), 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

expression is one that is “...purged of egotism, brought to maturity, related to real life, [and encompasses] intellect as well as emotion and will.”¹¹ Leaders in general, and chaplains in particular must adhere to this suggested approach, lest they have a narrow blueprint for spiritual development that aims to convert Marines to a specific religious system and/or compels them to believe that this particular system is the *only* means through which they can be mentally, emotionally, and spiritually transformed, or overcome the existential threats to their day-to-day lives.¹² Such a restricted and forceful paradigm is disrespectful to the unique faith convictions or religious expressions of Marines, and ultimately proves detrimental to improving their spiritual fitness. As an alternative, chaplains should always feel comfortable and confident engaging with Marines in faith-based, spiritually oriented discussions with the richness of their own manner and form, but in such a way that strengthens the faith of the Marine, not the particular faith of the chaplain.¹³ According to Rear Admiral Scott, “This is the Art of Chaplaincy...an interplay and overlap of our capabilities in a careful and thoughtful way.”¹⁴

¹¹ Statler, *Finding Our Flip Side*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³ Scott, *Spiritual Fitness*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*